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FORUM



The use of porn in sex and relationships education

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In 2016 a spate of media articles argued for showing porn in sex and relationships education (SRE) (for example, Murray 2016; Walker 2016). Generally, these pieces were coming from an anti-porn stance and arguing for showing porn in the classroom in order to dissuade young people from engaging with porn, or to encourage them to think critically about it.

Most of the pieces were based on Radio 4 presenter Jenni Murray's arguments that most young people are viewing porn and that it gives them unrealistic views of gender, particularly in relation to women's appearance and enjoyment of certain kinds of sex, and that they should therefore be taught how to critically evaluate porn in 'gender education' classes, just as they might literary texts in English literature. These ideas were welcomed by some sex education bodies and challenged by others.

While we agree that encouraging critical thinking about porn – and other sex and relationships-related media – is an excellent aim for SRE, we argue that there are huge problems with showing porn in the classroom, from a legal, ethical, and practical standpoint, whether for young people or for adults. In this article we outline these problems and put forward our view on what would be a more valuable use of time in SRE lessons.

Legal issues

Section 12 of the Sexual Offences Act (Crown Prosecution Services 2003) makes it a criminal offence to cause a child to watch a sexual act. In order for an offence to be committed, the purpose of the sexual act would have to be to gain sexual gratification. If it was clear that the images (which count under the Act) were shown for educational purposes, then it may not be seen as illegal, but clearly showing porn in the classroom skates very close to the line legally speaking.

Consent

Although many young people want more and better SRE, this is not true for all young people. In Justin's experience as a sex educator, some students just do not want to be there. Although parents can choose to remove their child from SRE classes, students often cannot choose to remove themselves. If we are endeavouring to teach young people to engage in consensual behaviour, then it is vital to model this by not making

the experience of SRE itself coercive. However, given the nature of schools, it is difficult to allow students to leave a lesson and go to the library, for example. Sensitive sex educators find ways to make all students feel comfortable by doing small group work, distance learning, engaging with scenarios, self-facilitation, card sorts, and making group agreements. They incorporate consent within lessons by allowing students to opt out of activities while still remaining in the lesson.

If teaching students about porn meant showing them porn, we would be showing them sexual images without their consent. It would be very difficult for students to remain in the room and not look at, or hear, the porn. If they were allowed to leave because they did not want to look at porn, then they would not be getting any porn education at all.

It is also vital to think about the power dynamics in play here, as is always necessary when talking about consent (Barker 2013). If a teacher introduces a lesson saying 'okay, I'm going to show you porn but you don't have to look or you can leave if you really want to', would a young person feel confident enough to leave? Male students in particular will probably have been influenced by the male sexual drive discourse which assumes that men must demonstrate interest in sex in order to be deemed masculine (Hollway 1984). Would such a student feel able to leave the lesson? Similarly, female students will probably be navigating the sexual double bind – not wanting to be viewed as too sexual, or not sexual enough (Bordini and Sperb 2013), which will pressure them to stay in the room to demonstrate 'up for it' femininity (Gill 2007). Bullying may well be a risk for any student who does not engage.

So it would be very difficult to ensure that all of the students watching the porn were actively consenting to be there. Perpetrating a non-consensual act in order to teach young people about consent (among other things) sounds rather unethical to us! It is also important to point out that it is unethical in relation to the producers and the performers of the images or videos being shown. They have consented to adults watching, and purchasing, their material – but not students in a school.

Watching porn is a sexual act

Although people watch porn for lots of different reasons, watching porn can be, and often is, a sexual act. Even if a person starts watching porn for non-sexual reasons it can soon become a sexual experience.

One could suggest that people can be turned on by many different things and that, in this way, porn is no different to, say, Chaucer, Shakespeare, or Toni Morrison. However, we would argue that, by definition, porn's intention is to sexually arouse people, and this is what makes it different to other media. Even if we were to say to a class 'okay, we're going to watch porn now but it's not for a sexual reason and we really shouldn't get turned on', can we honestly not reasonably expect that some will not be experiencing this as a sexual activity?

This means that if we show young people porn, we are potentially making them have sex – against their will. Even if they are not sexually aroused themselves, other people may be, which means that they would be non-consensually in the presence of people engaging in a sexual act. This is wrong on so many levels, even for the students who may be enthusiastic about the idea.

To spell this out even more clearly, just as not everyone is interested in sex education, not everyone is interested in porn (depending on the age group, this might actually be most young people), and not everyone is interested in sex – either as a young person or ever. EU Kids Online research in 2014 found that 17% of UK young people aged 9–16 had reported seeing sexual images in the past year online or offline, a decrease from the previous figure of 24% (Livingstone, Haddon, Vincent, Mascheroni and Olafsson 2014). Making students watch porn involves making them take part in a sexual act, which, as we have already established, would be extremely difficult to do consensually.

So, all in all, we believe that it is unethical, immoral, unjustifiable, and even unlawful to show young people porn in sex and relationships classes in school.

Working with adults

To get beyond the specific issues raised by the presence of children, let us consider SRE classes for adults. Would it be appropriate to show porn in the context of classes where all those participating were over 18, and where it was clearly advertised that the topics to be covered included sex, gender, sexuality, porn, relationships, and consent? In such a situation we still would not consider showing porn, both because of ethical problems and also because we do not believe that it would be useful.

Consent

In this situation, the same consent issues arise as we discussed earlier. Whoever runs the course has the power. Even if we flagged it up and said ‘okay, in week three we’re going to be showing you some carefully curated pornography – feel free not to come to that one’, how much pressure might people feel to come along to week three? Aside from the fact that they might not get their full value for money if they missed a week, they may also experience: fear of missing out, a desire to please the course leader, anxiety about what other group members might feel about them, or a sense of needing to prove how cool or ‘sex positive’ they are.

As already discussed, the inclusion of porn would also involve asking the group to potentially take part in a sexual activity with each other even as we were framing it as an educational experience. Similar ethical concerns surround porn research where participants are put in front of screens, shown porn, and either wired up and/or asked questions to ascertain what ‘effect’ it may have had on them (see Barker 2014).

Why use porn in SRE? To show people how to have sex

What are the reasons why we might want to show porn to adults as part of SRE? One is to teach people how to have sex. However, as McKee et al. (2010) point out, there are some things which porn teaches well and some things which porn teaches not so well in terms of healthy sexual development. They argue that porn is particularly deficient at teaching about relationship skills, negotiation, and consent. The nature of porn is that it does not show the complex and difficult conversations necessary to have enjoyable sex because that is not the aim of porn, and so pornography makes sex ‘look easy’.

Most people – young people included – know that how people have sex in porn is not a great guide to how people have sex in real life (McKee et al. 2010). Just as *Grand Theft Auto* as a video game is not a very useful source for learning about driving, pedestrians safety, ethics of treating sex workers, career advice, and how to conceal deadly weapons – porn is not a great sex education tool. The lights are on. The positions taken up are to show bodies. Consent is often not very obvious. Safer sex precautions are not demonstrated because safer sex in porn is about regular testing, which is obviously not shown in porn.

If we were to show people porn to teach them ‘how to do it’, what porn would we even use? What do we even mean by porn here? Images, videos, audio, written material? Would we show mainstream porn, gay or bisexual porn, feminist porn, porn for couples, porn with disabled people in, queer porn, porn with trans folk in? What acts would they depict? Would it be penis-in-vagina, penis-in-anus, oral, masturbation, frotting, sadomasochism, dominance and submission, massage, squirting, and so forth? There seems to be an idea that there is some perfect porn out there which would show loving and kind sex. The fact is that all of the aforementioned can show that. It is possible to engage in all of these kinds of sex with someone in a loving and respectful way. And who says that all sex has to be loving and kind – so long as it is consensual? It is also possible to engage in all of these activities in ways which are not consensual. It is difficult to imagine what kind of porn could be chosen for SRE which would not reinforce the divide between Rubin’s (1984) charmed circle and outer limits of sexuality, and any attempt not to do so might well run into problems around draconian ‘extreme pornography’ legislation, at least in the United Kingdom (Attwood and Smith 2010).

The showing people how to ‘do it’ aspect of using porn in SRE troubles us a lot, because it will probably reinforce a particular notion of what ‘it’ involves. There is a very clear script for what culturally ‘counts’ as sex. Kissing → clothes off → ‘foreplay’ → penetrative sex (Barker, Gill, and Harvey 2018). We see this in a lot of porn but also in television, film, books, sex advice, and also SRE (consider what you were taught about ‘virginity’, ‘safer sex’, and when you should do ‘it’).

As we have argued elsewhere (Barker and Hancock 2017), when any particular way of doing sex is taught, it often ends up reinforcing this idea of ‘normal’, which excludes so many people and which many of everyone else find so restricting that they do not actually enjoy sex. It also contributes to the non-consensual culture we have around sex: sex is something one person does to another, not with another, and if you are not doing a particular kind of sex you are not really doing it at all.

Why use porn in SRE? To critique porn

Another key argument for showing porn in SRE is in order to encourage people to critique it. You could argue that we ask people to critique other forms of media by showing it to them, or asking them to read it in class, so why not porn? Well, first there are differences. When students read a text like *The Wife of Bath* for A-level they generally do most of the reading at home – they do not have time to sit and go through it all line by line in class. Also, even if they did have time to read it all together that would be the same context in how people experience this media. *The Wife of Bath* (like a lot of texts in English literature) was written at a time when most people could not read – stories were read to people. It was a social group activity. Reading together in a class would pretty much resemble how

such media was meant to be read. Similarly, if we were watching a film in class or a television show, it would be pretty much how we might do this outside the classroom.

Watching porn has a very different and unique context which is part and parcel of what porn is (Attwood 2005). Take it out of that context and it is a very different source. Looking at/reading/listening to porn, for most people, is a private activity. It is an activity which involves a very specific and complicated relationship between the viewer and the source. It is an active relationship: switching from clip to clip; fast forwarding, rewinding, pausing; imagining being in the scene, or not; experiencing arousal, or not. It is an opportunity to reflect on our own desires, identities, and behaviours, or not; and, crucially, there is the opportunity to masturbate. Taking porn out of that context and watching it with other people changes the source, because the active context, the how we actually might watch porn, is an integral part of it.

If we were to have a porn module in a SRE course for adults, we would ask participants to do any porn viewing as homework: to watch whichever porn (or any images they might enjoy of a sexual or sensual nature) they like. We would then ask them to think about some questions which may help them to critically evaluate what was going on. They could start with what was happening in the scenes. Was there anything problematic going on? How was gender or sexuality depicted? We would also ask them to think about what was going on for them. Were they watching the scene or imagining they were in the scene? If so, who were they? What attracted them to that character? We would encourage them to reflect on their own desires but also on their own identities. We feel that such an activity would be more ethical, more realistic, and more interesting than just showing porn in class.

What we see is not the effect

Often when people talk about porn and young people they conflate what is contained in the images and the messages that they might send out with the effect this has on people. It is assumed that if a young person sees something, they might want to do it themselves. We see this in media moral panics about the impact of porn on rates of anal sex, shaving of pubic hair, labiaplasty, and so on (for example, Sellgren 2016).

As we know from media studies, and porn studies, this is not how young people, or anyone, consumes/interacts with porn or any media. As Bale (2011, 306) reports, 'young people draw upon their own experiences and emerging identities to interpret the media and employ broader values such as trust and mutual respect to formulate their attitudes, beliefs and values in their readings of media texts'. It is an active process. Young people are not passive sponges.

If we want to teach anyone about this we could ask them to reflect on any other media they may encounter – just as we do with young people in the earlier *Grand Theft Auto* example. It is pretty straightforward and we can demonstrate this and learn this without having to watch porn in the classroom.

Do we even really need to teach about porn?

Hopefully we have given a fair summary of why we believe that educators should not be showing people porn. Doing so is fraught with problems around consent and ethics, and would not be very useful or valuable even if we were able to do it consensually and ethically.

But do we even really need to teach about porn at all? Many young people do not look at porn or even see sexual images. Many more young people play games, watch YouTube clips, watch television, or read Young Adult fiction. Why not address the impact that these kinds of media may have?

The reason that porn is a problem is not that porn is necessarily a problem in and of itself (although it can be used in problematic way), it is that it demonstrates that most of the SRE available to young people and adults is completely out of touch, not real enough, and not relevant enough. If you want to, it is possible to teach about porn without showing people porn: many educators do this using discussion games, real-life scenarios, distanced learning approaches, and creative methods. For example, Justin Hancock's (2015) resource 'Planet Porn' has been around for many years and is his biggest selling resource, and the more recent *Do ... SRE* project (Durex 2017), which we were both involved with, includes many resources for teaching about porn.

However, just teaching porn in one isolated lesson (which is often how schools approach it) is not going to teach young people a great deal about what it is they need to learn in order to be able to have healthy, nurturing, and consensual sex and relationships (if they want them). So what should we do? We believe that if this is what we want, then it is this we should be teaching about. We should be teaching people about: their relationship with themselves; self-care; what is expected of them and how to deal with inequality; how to do different kinds of relationships (friends, family, romance, self, pets, religion, humankind); how to treat people consensually and how to communicate; how to manage risks of sex and relationships. This was the approach that Hancock took when co-writing the *Do ... SRE* resources, and was also our approach for adults in our book *Enjoy Sex* (Barker and Hancock 2017).

If we can provide people with quality SRE we do not even really have to teach about porn – because they will already be equipped to work it out for themselves.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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